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A discourse community, in its simplest form, is a group of individuals who share common goals and use communication as a prominent method of attaining them. The use of social media has allowed the river of discourse to flow freely and enables individuals to engage with each other about a range of subjects. Depending on your niche of choice, there is a specific side of the internet where you can find like-minded people to share ideas with. While social media can be very general, there is a specific place for book lovers to interact with one another. Given the name, “Bookstagram,” as a combination of book and Instagram, endless readers post reviews, tags and images of books that satisfy a carefully designed aesthetic. As a member of this broad group, this community is dear to me and has provided a safe space to share my interests. On Bookstagram, opinions of books are communicated in many different mediums, but generally, the most popular trend or genre at the time will determine the dominant method of communication.

A goal of members of Bookstagram is to share appreciation for books, while also providing thought-provoking reviews that will influence others to read the book as well. Appreciation can be shared simply by being a part of the community. Not much else is needed to be a self-proclaimed “book lover.” Book reviews, which normally summarize the story and provide the reader’s personal opinion on the book, is one of the methods that carries the

community forward. The goal of the reviews is to convince another person to read the book, or the opposite. While most reviews are positive, there isn't an absence of negative ones. A general rule for Bookstagram is to keep reviews friendly. Because Bookstagram is a platform not only for readers, but also authors and publishers, this is crucial. Even though one might not enjoy a book, keeping your opinions truthful, but respectful, is the key to keeping a welcoming and supportive community. It's seen as rude to tag an author in a review, whether a good or bad one, because it can open the door for unwanted discourse.

An article from *Wired* explains this phenomenon and its consequences. "Tagging" in itself is a mode of communication, which connects users all over the world from different backgrounds and cultures. However, "author spaces and reviewer spaces are left separate for a reason, and social media has really blurred those lines." (Tait). Regardless of the tone of the review, gathering the author's attention erases the unique relationship between author and reader. Despite this, each smaller community joins together into one large community of discourse.

People from all walks of life find a home on Bookstagram. Simply an interest in reading will lead to seasoned readers wanting to help you out and introduce you to the community. When I first created my account I didn't have many goals, I simply wanted to create a safe space to share my passionate love for books without judgment. As part of my research, I conducted an interview with my friend and fellow Bookstagrammer, Haylee. Haylee created a Bookstagram account after graduating college in the midst of COVID, and it gave her opportunities to share her love for reading. To this day, after nearly seven months of building relationships and sharing posts, I can fully classify Bookstagram as a discourse community who is unique in many ways. On the platform, books are recommended in every genre imaginable, but oftentimes they are

repeatedly recommended, which leads to a lack of diversity in genres that are shared and the methods of communication they are shared by.

There are a multitude of different methods of communication for members of Bookstagram, such as tags, reviews, annotations, abbreviations and giveaways. Mostly, there are specific acronyms and abbreviations that are commonly used among Bookstagrammers. This specific lexis is commonly agreed upon and understood by all. Some examples are “TBR” which stands for books that are “To-Be-Read.” Another popular one is “DNF,” which is used to say you “Did-Not-Finish” a book. Bookstagram can also be simplified to just “Booksta.” Terms such as these make writing captions and posts easier, while also still getting the point across in simple terms. As of recently, popular authors have been abbreviated as well. Sarah J. Maas, the author of an extremely popular fantasy series, has been shortened to SJM among readers. Others in this boat are Taylor Jenkins Reid (TJR) and Colleen Hoover (CoHo.)

Besides the normal reviews of books, tags and challenges are a fun, non-critical way to discuss books. Often beginning with a hashtag and ending with the word “tag” or “challenge,” these prompts are a unique way to combine hobbies, recommend books, and convey opinions. Tags, as just mentioned, are one of the most popular trends on Bookstagram, along with the annotations of books. However, what I’ve noticed in my time on Bookstagram is that whatever the most people are participating in that also is deemed the most “aesthetic,” will be the primary method. There is no specified amount of time that these trends last because they don’t necessarily die. Instead, they will make their rounds continuously as more accounts join in on them.

Social media has become one of, if not the best way to spread news, share thoughts and market products. For Bookstagram specifically, “Social media has connected literary

communities, challenged gatekeepers and helped sell books which may otherwise have been ignored.” (Rahim). In an article from *Independent*, Jane Curry, who is the managing director of an Australian indie publisher called Ventura Press, says that “Instagram influences the curation of literary lists and therefore what we read.” Because of the specific methods of communication on Bookstagram, non-readers have access to trustworthy reviews from experienced readers. Along with this, publishers have a newfound way to market up and coming authors because they know what their audience wants. This can lead to genre domination, which has always been a common thing, but the recent focus of “trope marketing” has become the supreme method. Publishers and authors will market books in the form of a Reel on Instagram, often with a popular song in the background. They will then list the tropes that occur in the book which are most commonly “enemies to lovers,” “one bed trope,” and so on. Readers will eat these posts up, then proceed to buy the book which benefits the author or publisher. This technique isn’t bad, but it has become so common that it’s often the only thing you see on Bookstagram.

The annotation of books also contributes to this “trope marketing.” A more recent trend, since writing in books has been stigmatized for a long while; but it has nonetheless changed the way opinions of books are communicated. Before, when I thought of annotating texts, I was brought back to middle school English class where I was told to annotate for unknown words, questions I might have, or figurative language. Bookstagram’s version of annotating most often includes underlining and highlighting quotes and penciling in reactions to dialogue or a plot twist. It’s a much more simplistic method that’s based more on emotion than logical analysis. Of course, there are some readers that prefer the latter, as well as there are some books that require it. As someone who personally annotates, I’m an advocate for using your personal books in

whatever way you'd like. Each person who annotates has a different system; they might use certain colors that mean different things in different books.

However, a recent trend has been doodling and flat-out drawing in books; most of the time on the title page, but sometimes these drawings cover the words. Considering that if that book is their own copy, that person is free to do whatever they'd like to it. But, since this new trend has basically guaranteed endless likes and shares and become the newest obsession of Bookstagram, for people like me who don't want to draw all over their books, it conjures a struggle for engagement. This isn't to say that my other posts don't do well, but they certainly aren't the focal point. While talking with Haylee, she made many good points about this topic:

Norah: So, I mean, I guess on the topic of making books look good, does the recent popularization of annotating books, does that change the way we communicate opinions of books, in your opinion?

Haylee: I think it kind of does because I actually hadn't thought about that before. But now that you mentioned it, annotating is, I don't know, it's got an increase in popularity lately. I feel like five years ago or maybe even longer, that annotating was like a big no. Like, you shouldn't write in your book. And now it's become like, an aesthetic, and instead of just annotating, like, you, underline something relatable in the book, per se, or just something you like. I feel like people will go through a book and annotate something that's really going to, you know, just a certain scene in a book that's going to get people's attention.

Norah: Absolutely.

Further on in the interview, I asked Haylee what she thinks about the doodling and drawing in books that has become popular as of late. She said, “There's definitely becoming a blurred line, I guess, between drawing, like, cutesy stuff and annotating books versus full on artwork in books now, which I mean, like you said, I love looking at that. But also, how are you going to want to read the book again?” An amazing thing about Bookstagram is that you're free to read in whatever way you'd like, even if that means drawing all over your pages. As a community, we've learned to respect others' decisions with their books after being ridiculed for so long for little things such as simply sharing a love for books in the first place. Another snippet from the interview reveals more about the specific mode of communication that is annotation:

Norah: So do you think annotation is a specific form of discourse? Because it is like sharing ideas. If you're sharing your thoughts on a book and what you write in it and stuff like that, would you say it's a form of communication?

Haylee: Yeah, especially even if you don't, like, add your own thoughts within the margins or anything. I feel like even underlining or highlighting definitely shows what you're trying to communicate to your audience... They're getting the idea of, like, that's what you loved in that book, or what you're trying to share with your readers to maybe get them to read that book.

Another thing to note about this new annotation technique is that the books that are most often portrayed in this way are romance books, where heart-fluttering lines between the love interests receive the most attention. This is where my research question comes into play; How do

popularity and trends determine the method of communication on Bookstagram, specifically in the form of annotation and tags?

The main thing I've noticed about the Bookstagram community ever since joining is that the aesthetic and quantity of books is prioritized over quality. A contributor to this phenomenon derives from the recent "influencer" movement. Influencers are people who market their lives, and I believe this has made a mark on the way the Bookstagram community runs itself. A thread I found on Reddit acknowledges the common apologies that accounts give after a short break from being active. The user, Allo-, says, "People on bookstagram act as if if they don't post for a week their followers will be WORRIED about where they are but the truth is... nobody cares and we all have busy lives to think about; I'm not going to start worrying about where my favorite bookstagrammers are." This person is saying that if Bookstagram and reading is a hobby, we shouldn't treat it like a job because of the expectations that ourselves and others set. These expectations, which are seen in the popular trends we see in posts, not only encourage us to treat Bookstagram like a job but also determine if we participate in those trends or not.

In my interview with Haylee, we discussed our personal experiences on Bookstagram. We acknowledge that sometimes, a review of an unpopular book, even if it's one we loved, won't receive as much attention as a post about a popular one. And because that review doesn't fit what has been decided as "aesthetic," we might feel obligated to take a "break" and read more popular books or even rethink how we post. But what is this "aesthetic" that I keep mentioning? If you open Bookstagram, what you will most likely see is a stack of books laid on a white sheet, surrounded by objects such as jewelry, claw clips, highlighters or pens, and sticky tabs used for annotating. It's almost as if the appearance of the post and what's in the photo matters more than

what we have to say about the book. In this specific section of the interview, Haylee and I discuss this:

Norah: Do you think that we focus on bookstagram more on aesthetics than actual content? Or do you think they're kind of interchangeable or like they go hand in hand? Because, like, obviously you want your post to look good. That's what gets attention, you know? But like we said before, it's like a lot of its tags. It's not really reviews. Some things don't really contribute. So what's your stance on that?

Haylee: Well, for me, personally, I think on reviews, I tend to care less how my post looks with the book in it because I'm more focused on the actual review. The post, like, I would say, like it's more simple. Whereas when people do tags, you tend to have a really messy type of post, but it's more in your face, I guess. Like, I've noticed that on my Explore page. When posts get way more attention, like 200 likes or more, they have either like a huge stack of books with a lot going on within the picture, and it's kind of like they use objects and items that are popular. I don't know. It's just like how do I word it? It's, like, trendy, I guess you could say. Like, it's the trend of, like do you know how there's a trend of, like, the clean girl?

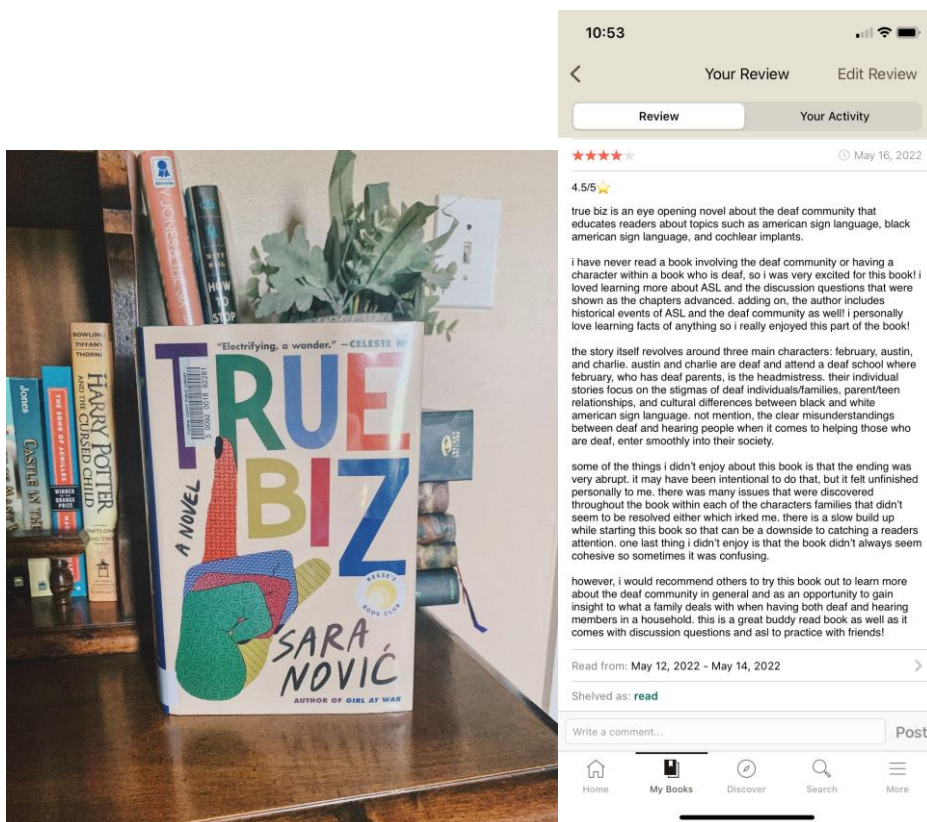
Norah: Oh, yeah.

Haylee: I've noticed that about a lot of posts that go big and blow up. There's usually, like, a white sheet, the books and either, like, a coffee or they have, like, some hair clips.

Norah: Yes, the claw clips.

Haylee: Right. Stuff like that, that is really in style and, like, I know this is just for Bookstagram but, like, those trends and those styles are everywhere on every platform right now. So, I mean, you're going to see that anywhere. So I guess that just is like, in your face. Like, this is what everyone is doing. This is what everyone is liking. And then you throw in a popular book with that and people automatically love that post.

Here is an example of a review that Haylee would post:



Now that the aesthetic of Bookstagram has been described, how exactly does this play into the domination of popular books and trends? While there's nothing inherently wrong with reading only popular books, since any reading is considered good, it almost promotes a culture of

exclusivity. This means that those who read the popular books will get the most engagement on their photos, while those who don't participate will fall under the radar. The exclusivity, while not explicit on Bookstagram, groups these users into a deliberate herd mentality. While Bookstagram may be a supportive community, how can we be supportive of everyone if we only put effort into acknowledging the books we see most? Because of this, someone who doesn't read popular books is less likely to be truly immersed into the community, because they will not understand the discourse and references made.

Additionally, prominent tropes in that book and/or genre will contribute to the way that book is marketed to others, oftentimes in the form of relatable tags and aesthetic annotations. Along with that, as discussed before, trends that exist elsewhere on social media such as the "clean girl" aesthetic have become woven into Bookstagram. This affects discourse as well, which overall makes the prominent method of communication change based on what the majority likes the most (ie. whatever post gets the most likes or shares). These rhythms of activity have affected Haylee in her time on Bookstagram. She says:

"I have noticed the difference in the attention I get on certain posts. If I post, like, a romance book, like, they kind of get more attention because it's just, like, popular at the time. So, like, everyone has just read that maybe. So everyone, like, jumps in on that. And then if I post, like, a nonfiction book or a book that I still love but it's not popular right now, or it's never really been popular, it doesn't get a lot of attention because no one's really connecting with it."

What was once a hobby of posting for fun can quickly make it feel like a job once the herd mentality takes over. Bottom line, it comes down to the fact that all readers have different tastes. Reading habits differ from person to person, and there is no right way to read or review a book. These different tastes will in turn determine the way we will communicate our ideas. It's true that in the community of Bookstagram, the genre and popularity of a book will determine

the perceptions and opinions of its readers and how those are communicated. Despite the popular trends at the time, readers are free to read what they'd like. As an avid reader of fantasy, I'm personally more likely to pay attention to different aspects of a story than strict romance-only readers. That's not to say I don't enjoy romance books, but fantasy books definitely contain more structure and development than the former. I think the reason fantasy is more aligned to me is that I prefer an escape when I read. Fantasy books communicate a sense of curiosity; the stakes are high, the world is different from our own, you never know who to trust, etc. On the other hand, romance books are predictable; you know in the end that the couple will end up together. Beyond the components of a story, I simply believe that having a backlog of genres you enjoy and are passionate about further contributes to being a part of the diverse community that is Bookstagram.

In conclusion, if a book fits the aesthetic requirements constructed by the community and has all the tropes and qualifications, it will be deemed popular. This will therefore contribute to which method it will be communicated in, such as cutesy annotations or a simple tag. No single person has authority on Bookstagram; instead it's comprised of people from various cultures and backgrounds who collectively make a home for readers. While there are problematic elements, just as there are in nearly everything, discourse occurs daily on Bookstagram. Admiration of literature is a unique hobby to partake in, along with the conversations brought about by it.

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